



TITLE:

Development and Change in Rural Malaysia:
The Role of the Village Development
Committee(<Special Issue>Socio-Economic
Change and Cultural Transformation in
Rural Malaysia : A Preliminary Research
Report)

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CITATION:

Shamsul A.B., Development and Change in Rural Malaysia: The Role of the Village Development Committee(<Special Issue>Socio-Economic Change and Cultural Transformation in Rural Malaysia : A Preliminary Research Report). 東南アジア研究 1988, 26(2): 218-228

ISSUE DATE:

1988-09

URL:

<http://hdl.handle.net/2433/56333>

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Development and Change in Rural Malaysia: The Role of the Village Development Committee

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Introduction

This is a preliminary report based upon a month of research primarily on secondary sources deposited at the Malaysian National Archives and the libraries of various government departments. The report has been prepared as background material for field research to be conducted between April and June 1988, during which empirical data on the topic studied will be gathered.

It is relevant to note that the author has previously conducted two years of intensive fieldwork (1980-81) on "local politics and rural development at the grassroots in Malaysia" in a rural Malay community, and during that period he examined briefly the role of Village Development Committee within the context of the larger topic studied. In the present and forthcoming research his focus is solely on this village-level organization.

This report consists of three parts. The first part provides a brief note on rural development in Malaysia. The second part outlines the evolution of Malaysia's rural development administration. The final part examines the origins, organization and performance of the rural institution called Village

Development Committee.

Rural Development in Malaysia :

A Note

Rural development policy has been an important component of planned development in Malaysia. The phrase "rural development," as used in Malaysia, connotes both direct productivity-raising programmes and efforts to improve infrastructure and social services for consumption as well as production. It has been mainly for the Malays, the major ethnic group of Malaysia, the majority of whom reside in the rural areas as peasant producers. They also form the most important political group to the ruling party, particularly UMNO (United Malays National Organization), which has been the dominant partner in the ruling coalition, first known as Alliance and later National Front. Without rural Malay support, UMNO would not exist. Hence, the rural development policy is essentially aimed at satisfying the desires of the rural Malay electorate.

The highly political nature of rural development programmes in Malaysia need not be stressed here. Suffice it to note that such programmes have even made the distribution of functions among cabinet ministers a matter of great sensitivity. At the grassroots, the presence or absence of rural

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development programmes often decides the fate of an UMNO candidate in the state or national general elections. It is imperative for us then to examine what are the rural development programmes, how they are implemented, and the results.

In this report we begin our investigation by examining the administrative history and structure that have supported the whole rural development programme in Malaysia. We shall then look closely at the Village Development Committee and its viability as a rural organization.

The Evolution of Malaysia's Rural Development Administration

The implementation and constant monitoring of the numerous rural development projects at the local level in Malaysia is not an easy task. It has been both administratively trying and politically difficult. To cope with this daunting task the Malaysian government has adopted a special strategy called the "Operations Room Technique (ORT)."

Historically, the ORT emerged from a successful colonial military practice during the Emergency period of 1948-60. During that time, the government was conducting a war against the communist insurgents which involved not only destroying the insurgents but also denying them the support of the civilians. As a result, it was quite common for entire village communities to be relocated in order to cut off aid to the insurgents. To undertake and coordinate this mammoth task, close and effective coordination of military, police and administrative personnel was vital. Hence a War Council with an

Executive Committee was set up, with operations rooms at the national, state, and district levels.

The First Five-Year Malaya Plan of 1956-60 was implemented at the height of the Emergency period and not long after Malaysia's first national general elections of 1955, both of which took place while Malaysia was still under British rule. So, the introduction of the ORT as a strategy to bring about rural development, just a few months before the Emergency ended in July 1960, was considered most appropriate by those in power. In short, what was suitable for the war against the insurgents was also suitable, for the "war" against "rural backwardness."

The ORT for development consists organizationally of four central elements, namely, the Committee System, the Operation Room, the RED Book Plan, and the Briefing Method and Field Inspection. The Committee System followed closely the pattern of the War Council Executive Committee, whereby a hierarchy of committees was set up at the national, state, and district levels; and to this was added a committee at the village level. These committees and their members play the role of planners, administrators, implementors and evaluators. Operation Rooms are physically set up at the national, state, district and village levels and there maps, graphs, pictures and charts showing the location, details and progress of each rural development project are displayed prominently and often colourfully.

The RED Book Plan is a large book literally (2 1/2 feet by 3 feet in size) containing detailed outlines of all the projects under im-

plementation at each committee level. It is red because RED stands for Rural Economic Development; red is regarded as a very lucky colour, and the RED Book represents the antithesis of "red-tape." The Briefing Method and Field Inspection is essentially a feedback-seeking and evaluating mechanism. Ministers and high-ranking civil servants conduct regular field inspections and hold regular briefings in the Operation Rooms to take stock, to diagnose the causes of any delays that may have occurred in development projects listed in the RED Book Plan, and to prescribe on-the-spot remedies. Through this exercise a higher level of coordination between the various parties involved in the implementation of the development projects is achieved.

The rural development projects listed in the RED Book Plan include the following: the construction of minor roads and bridges; land development; water supplies; processing and marketing facilities for rural producers; rural industries; school; health centres and playing fields; irrigation for rice areas; minor irrigation work; river clearing; electricity and telecommunications; mosques and *surau* (small prayer houses); bus and bicycle stands; cooperative development; and numerous other minor projects. Not all of these projects are listed in all the RED Book Plans in Operation Rooms located across the country. All projects, however, have long-term and short-term objectives. The short-term ones are meant to create visible signs of progress and are thus called "development covercrop" projects. The long-term ones are meant to raise levels of productivity, to increase employ-

ment opportunities, and ultimately to eradicate poverty in the rural areas.

The RED Book Plan of the ORT received wide publicity when it was first announced. Local newspapers held RED Book essay contests; university students produced a BLUE Book, in which they listed suggestions to improve rural life that complemented the content of the RED Book; and various business associations followed with their own book plans but the colours were not specified.

The ORT and its RED Book Plan continued to dominate the implementation of rural development projects under the Second Five-Year Malaya Plan of 1961-65. The results were encouraging indeed, at least for the short-term projects, which mainly concerned infrastructure. For example, the rural roads increased from 250 miles of new roads in the 1956-60 period, to 2,060 miles in the 1961-65 period. Similar phenomenal increases were achieved in other infrastructure projects. If these short-term projects were meant to create visible signs of progress, the government has achieved more than it expected. The implication of this achievement at the grassroots level is important to the role of the Village Development Committee, which we shall examine shortly.

When the First Malaysia Plan of 1966-70 was launched, the RED Book Plan component of the ORT was phased out because it had achieved its main objective of providing the so-called "development covercrop." Although the successful creation of these construction projects was important, it did not bring about the total rural development that the government had in mind. The government then felt that there was an

urgent need to educate the people to use these new amenities and, even more important, to encourage the rural population to participate in government's efforts to help them.

Therefore, to replace the RED Book Plan of the ORT, the government introduced a series of "sloganeering and change-awareness" campaigns. This was essentially, a "preconditioning process" to achieve "modernization." During the Emergency period, similar military campaigns were categorised as psychological warfare strategies. The military idiom "operations" continued to be used to designate the various sloganeering and change-awareness campaigns.

The first in the series, launched in 1966, was called "Operation Progress" (*Gerakan Maju*). Its emphasis was on group action to effect community development. The vehicle for the process was the Village Development Committee. Through this Committee the various activities of such village-level organizations as cooperatives, youth clubs, cultural groups and PTAs were "coordinated horizontally" to generate a village esprit de corps. A number of village-level competitions in agricultural production, handicrafts, and building a "model village" were conducted so that the rural people could be guided by demonstration and would compete for progress.

The second programme, launched in 1968 and called "Operation Self-help" (*Gerakan Jayadiri*), mainly aimed at individual self-improvement and was productivity-oriented. This was quite different from the earlier "Operation Progress," which was

group-action based and community improvement-oriented. The third one, implemented in 1972, that is, during the Second Malaysia Plan of 1971-75, was called "Operation Renewal" (*Gerakan Pembaharuan*). The call was for village-level social and economic improvements through community development efforts. It was very similar to the "Operation Progress" in its aim but was implemented in a period just after the bloody May 13 1969 racial riot. The new campaign could be viewed as an effort by the government to reassure the Malay rural voters that they were not forgotten or neglected. It was a "renewal" effort both for the government and for rural folk.

For various economic and political reasons, this series of campaigns replacing The RED Book Plan seemed to have little impact, as the massive peasant and student demonstrations of 1974 showed. A special White Paper was tabled in Parliament in 1975 to explain why the demonstrations took place. This was despite the countrywide implementation of the Adult Education and Community Development Program to create "development literacy," and the establishment of the Malaysian Centre for Development Studies to train both "officers of development" and the "leaders of the recipients of development" in rudimentary sociology and psychology.

Thus, in 1975, a GREEN Book Plan was introduced with all the paraphernalia of the RED Book Plan. This time the aim was not to provide a "development covercrop." Instead, it was literally meant to increase the cultivation and production of food crops to meet the needs of the nation. At the

same time, such activities would supplement the income of the rural people, especially those who had been solely dependent on cash crops, particularly rubber, for their livelihood. It was thus hoped to reduce the pressure of the staggering inflation in the country, which had affected rural people badly. In other words, if the RED Book Plan of the ORT was to fight, amongst other things, peasant land hunger, the GREEN Book Plan was to prevent the peasants from suffering real hunger.

Whether the GREEN Book Plan succeeded or failed remains a mystery to this day. Neither official report nor academic study is available for us to assess its performance. Perhaps it has been lost amongst the host of other major development efforts of the 1970s which were overtly directed towards the expansion of Malay entrepreneurs and the Malay urban middle class. There were carried out under the now famous *bumiputera* (lit. prince of the soil) policy of the NEP.

With the implementation of this policy, the focus of attention and development efforts in the rural areas has shifted from agricultural cultivators to rural entrepreneurs. The former constitute the majority of the rural Malay population. With this shift come changes in the general administrative structure of development administration in rural Malaysia. The changes are meant to facilitate the implementation of the various government development programmes under the *bumiputera* policy.

The impact of such changes at the district level has been great. Although the ORT is still adopted in the implementation of the

development projects, the control of the district development machinery, including the ORT, has changed hands from local bureaucrats to local politicians, the *wakil rakyat* (lit. people's representatives; namely, State Legislative Assembly members and members of Parliament). The dominance of the local politicians is further enhanced by the fact that many local bureaucrats of both high and low rank have become partisans, openly belonging to the ruling UMNO party organization. Hence they are under the control of the top local politicians, that is, the *wakil rakyat*, not only within their local party organization but also in the district development machinery itself. As a result, the district development machinery, which controls and monitors every aspect of the implementation of all district development projects under the *bumiputera* policy, has now become an integral part of the local ruling party apparatus. The political and economic implications of this pattern for the process of distribution of development benefits at different levels within the district are far-reaching.

One of the obvious implications of this trend is manifested clearly in the political sphere. Intense internal political strife within local UMNO organizations has developed almost all over the country. The contest for official positions within UMNO local organizations has been vicious, and outbreaks of violence at annual meetings have been on the rise. Many local politicians have become rich overnight in the "business of development" under the *bumiputera* policy, which enables them to buy continued political support with hard cash and has led to the

rise of "money politics." Factional politics have become more overt and widespread both at the national as well as the local level. This reached a height recently, when the UMNO President, Mahathir Mohamed, who is also Malaysia's Prime Minister, was seriously challenged in the national UMNO elections in April 1987 and won very narrowly.

Realizing that a "revolution of rising expectations" is taking place amongst rural Malays, who provide the bulk of UMNO's support, the government (read UMNO) has made many "peace offerings." One of these was the launching of RED Book Plan II in late 1987. The objective of the new RED Book does not differ much from that of the original one launched almost thirty years ago. The lack of basic amenities (e.g. piped water, electricity, etc.) remains a central problem to be resolved by the RED Book Plan II. This implies that despite the provision of infrastructural facilities, many parts of the rural areas have been neglected. This is not at all surprising, because the emphasis of rural development from the mid-1970s has been on the creation of opportunities for rural Malay entrepreneurs, who form a small proportion of the rural population. Although the rest of the rural folks have not been totally neglected, it is the meteoric rise of the few rural entrepreneurs as local *nouveaux riches* which creates the feeling of being "left out," "short-changed" and "taken for a ride" amongst the majority of rural folk. This was the reason behind the serious UMNO internal strife in 1987, which has since worsened.

It is against this background that one has

to locate the establishment of the Village Development Committee, in which the concept of "village" is clearly a state-imposed social construct to facilitate economic and political control of the rural folks upon whom the political survival of the ruling party, and Malaysia, too, depends. We shall now examine briefly the origins, organization and performance of the Village Development Committee.

Village Development Committee : Past and Present

The setting up of the War Council and its Executive Committee by the colonial government during the Emergency period of 1948-60 was in effect an exercise in overt political control and a convenient administrative centralization through the use of military force without military rule. One of the more successful outcomes of the whole exercise was the massive, countrywide village relocation programme, under which an equally successful "re-education and rehabilitation" scheme for the communist sympathizers amongst the villagers was also implemented. It is significant to note here that most of these villagers were Chinese—an important sociological consideration in Malaysia's context.

It came as no surprise, therefore, when the concept of the War Council Executive Committee was adopted almost *in toto* by the post-independence government to implement its rural development programme. This time, however, it was the Malay rather than Chinese villagers whom the government had to bring into line. They were not relocated,

but their social life was reorganized and reconstituted to suit the government's prevailing interests. Hence the setting up of the Village Development Committee (VDC), which was absent in the administrative structure of the War Council, became an important component of the Committee System of the new development initiatives.

This began to be instituted by the national government under the Second Five-Year Malaya Plan of 1961-65, that is, during the RED Book Plan period. VDCs were to replace the *ketua kampung* (village headman) with a "democratically elected" committee of from eleven to fifteen members. Each *mukim* (subdistrict) in the district was to have at least one such committee. The government even built "community halls" to be used by the VDCs as their bases or operation rooms.

The aim of this change was to increase the ability of the district administration to mobilize local initiative in community development effort. The central government saw the VDCs as an instrument for : harnessing villagers' energy for their own social and economic development ; developing their awareness of agriculture, health and small-scale industrial development ; working up development programmes for villages on a *gotong-royong* (self-help) basis ; providing effective leadership and building confidence for income-producing projects ; modernizing villagers' attitudes ; encouraging efficient use of government input and promoting cooperation with government departments ; acting for liaison at the district level and submitting progress reports, while at the same time ensuring the implementation of directives

and orders of the District Rural Development Committee. In short, government wanted the people to work together on common projects, thus developing a sense of community or "kampungness"—an effort at local "social engineering."

The VDCs are supposed to be popularly elected, with committee members serving for two years. They are supposed to meet monthly to discuss village development and petition the district administration regarding development projects and issues. Actually committees do not meet monthly, do not communicate regularly with district officers, and often try to press their petitions directly with wakil rakyat or other influential local politicians. Nor are the committees actually "popularly elected." Mukim influentials propose the slate of candidates, who are then either appointed by district officers or "elected" by consensus at a public meeting called and run by the mukim influentials who set up the slate. Hence members of opposition parties or their sympathizers are excluded from most of the VDCs.

The Assistant District Officer (ADO) for Rural and Community Development is the key figure at the district level. He screens communications from the VDCs and writes memoranda to relevant agencies of government. He has only a small amount of discretionary funds to be used mostly for maintenance of roads, bridges, mosques etc. in the district. This means that the vast majority of the petitions of the VDCs cannot be fulfilled at all, much less in a reasonably short time. The VDC will petition over and over again for something it considers important and get virtually

nowhere. The ADO for Rural Development must carefully spread what he is allotted so as to make sure all the mukim get something every once in a while. It is not in his best interests to meet often with the VDCs or let them press too much on him. Since VDC meetings often are held in the evenings after his office hours, such meetings can frequently be avoided unless some absolutely pressing issue is on the agenda.

With regard to large projects done by government agencies, for example, water supply, electricity, big bridges, schools, irrigation, etc., the agencies have their own timetable for those activities and do not really respond to petitioning from below, such as from the VDCs.

The VDCs have, since 1975, had an "S" added to their acronym, to signify a new extra function: security. Hence it is now known as the Village Development and Security Committee (VDSC). The government has also initiated *RELA* or vigilante corps to oversee village security and to act as their "eyes and ears" in the villages. Members of this corps receive para-military training and each has been issued with a shot-gun. But whether this "S" is added or not makes very little difference; the VDSC is not viable or effective because of it.

Government reports and other studies have pointed out that, operationally, the VDSCs throughout Malaysia have suffered many shortcomings. The main one relates to the ineffectiveness of its leadership. Because all village heads and committee members are "government appointees" and their names are recommended by local politicians,

they often lack leadership qualities, skills or proven acceptability to the villagers. They are mainly party sympathizers or cronies of local politicians.

Besides that, the post of village head is an honorary one, not that of a paid civil servant. He may be a peasant, taxi-driver, or a religious teacher. Therefore, he performs the tasks of village head on a part-time basis and receives a small allowance of about M\$ 400 (about US \$160) a year. This is hardly a great incentive. The committee members are not paid at all.

However, the village heads and the committee members are expected to know what is happening in their village, although they are not vested with any authority over their areas of responsibility. They have no enforcement powers and, therefore, can only advise people and seek their cooperation. They are often confused by the endless flow of concepts and slogans from the top, and yet they are supposed to disseminate these ideas to the local folks and to seek their participation.

The VDSC is often at a loss to understand whether the "RED Book Plan" or the "GREEN Book Plan" is aimed towards self-sufficiency or market production. When there is surplus production, there is no market for it. Some villagers have exhausted their pieces of land but they are not able to obtain new pieces to participate fully in the implementation of projects under the RED or GREEN Book Plans.

As a result, many VDSCs exist only on record and in reality have become defunct. Therefore, community halls, the hallmark of Malaysia's developmental initiative at the

local level, have become empty and run down. Many have turned into "meeting" places for cows, goats and local juvenile delinquents.

It is not surprising at all that, since 1980, the economic role of the VDSC has been de-emphasised and its political role stressed more than before. Hence it only maintains its function in rural government. Many of its economic functions have been taken over by other government-organized local organizations, such as the Farmers' Cooperative, or the local branches of national statutory bodies, such as the Rubber Industry Smallholder Development Authority (RISDA) and the Federal Land Consolidation and Rehabilitation Authority (FELCRA).

In an effort to turn the VDSC into an effective political organization the government (read the ruling party) has, in some states, made it mandatory for a village head to become the chairperson of the UMNO branch in his village, or the UMNO branch chief of the village to take over the village headship once the services of the incumbent have been terminated by the government, often immediately. The aim of this change is to enable the village head to farm out party funds, in cash or in kind, to reward "helpful and useful" villagers. This is necessary to complement the little "crusts of development pies," which are usually not enough to buy continued local political support. With this dual function, the village head is in a better position to mobilize the villagers for both official and party political activities.

Although the VDSC runs the village administration, it is often the local Community

Development Organization or *KEMAS* which provides the organizational and political support that the VDSC lacks. *KEMAS* is a government department, called the Department of Community Development, under the Ministry of National and Rural Development. Its activities fall into two broad categories. Firstly, activities that are economic in nature, such as small-scale poultry farming, production of handicrafts for sale, tailoring and furniture-making. Secondly, those that are educational and vocational in nature, such as running domestic science classes for women, religious classes, literacy classes, pre-school classes, motor-repair classes and leadership courses. *KEMAS* provides professional staff for all the activities and they are all Malays. Most of the staff serving in a particular area come from the villages of the area. Unlike other civil servants, the staff of *KEMAS* are allowed to participate actively in party political (read UMNO) activities. In other words, all *KEMAS* staff simultaneously serve the government and UMNO. It is in this sense *KEMAS* complements VDSC at the village level.

Therefore, it is not uncommon for VDSC members to be recruited from the local *KEMAS* staff. The latter also actively recruit new members for UMNO. Like the RELA members, they too serve as the "ears and eyes" for the government and provide up-to-date information to higher authorities about all the happenings in the village. Herein lies the virtue of having locals as staff of *KEMAS*. Since they reside in their own villages, amongst their close family and friends, they are ideal in-

formers. They operate without raising the suspicion of the people they are observing. The authorities can therefore very quickly suppress any form of opposition before it spreads or gains momentum, once they have obtained information from KEMAS staff. The same staff are usually mobilized during general elections, mainly conducting house-to-house campaigns under the guise of family visits, or campaigning at the various classes and activities of KEMAS. In short, nobody in any Malay village in rural Malaysia today escapes the eyes of the higher authorities, particularly if he or she is involved in activities considered detrimental to the interests of the government. The retribution from the government for "unwanted elements" or individuals "threatening national security" is swift and often severe, but never made public. Recent political events in Malaysia provide ample evidence of this.

Besides KEMAS, there are at least three other voluntary organizations which play a supporting socio-political role to VDSC, namely, the Youth Associations, Mosque Committee and Death/Funeral Charity Association (Persatuan Khairat Kematian). None of them surpasses KEMAS in its contribution, but each of them provides what KEMAS does not offer: for example, the Death/Funeral Charity Association caters for the funeral expenses of all members within the village and often for villagers who are non-members too. Such expenses could be costly for the village poor. The Youth Club, often together with the local UMNO Youth Wing, caters mainly to the needs of unemployed youths. Some of their activities overlap with KEMAS.

Though at most times the Mosque Committee plays the role of caretaker of the local mosque and cemetery, it is KEMAS that conducts religious classes, mostly at the mosque, and with the cooperation of the Mosque Committee. Therefore, together these voluntary organizations and KEMAS help to create and sustain a much-needed village consciousness, and thereby lend legitimacy to VDSC. The absence or the lack of support from these organizations often leads to a VDSC becoming defunct.

Conclusion

This report provides the necessary backdrop to a more detailed empirical, village-based study on the Village Development Committee, not only for the author but also for those interested in this particular rural organization. It does not pretend to be an exhaustive survey of rural development in Malaysia or of the Village Development Committee. But it does cover those areas previously neglected by other researchers who have studied the Village Development Committee. It is hoped that after the forthcoming extended field research a more exciting description of the Village Development Committee in action could be presented as a final report of the whole research project.

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